



Rebekah

רבקה

Brave
Beloved
Blessing Engineer

Then the servant took ten of his master's camels and set out, taking with him all the bounty of his master; and he made his way to Aram-naharim, to the city of Nahor. He made the camels kneel down by the well outside the city, at evening time, the time when women come out to draw water. And he said, "O Lord, God of my master Abraham, grant me good fortune this day, and deal graciously with my master Abraham: Here I stand by the spring as the daughters of the townsmen come out to draw water; let the maiden to whom I say, 'Please, lower your jar that I may drink,' and who replies, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels'—let her be the one whom You have decreed for your servant Isaac. Thereby shall I know that You have dealt graciously with my master."

He had scarcely finished speaking, when Rebekah, who was born to Bethuel, the son of Milcah the wife of Abraham's brother Nahor, came out with her jar on her shoulder. The maiden was very beautiful, a virgin whom no man had known. She went down to the spring, filled her jar, and came up. The servant ran toward her and said, "Please, let me sip a little water from your jar." "Drink, my lord," she said, and she quickly lowered her jar upon her hand and let him drink. When she had let him drink his fill, she said, "I will also draw for your camels, until they finish drinking." Quickly emptying her jar into the trough, she ran back to the well to draw, and she drew for all his camels.

The man, meanwhile, stood gazing at her, silently wondering whether the Lord had made his errand successful or not. When the camels had finished drinking, the man took a gold nose-ring weighing a half-shekel, and two gold bands for her arms, ten shekels in weight. "Pray tell me," he said, "whose daughter are you? Is there room in your father's house for us to spend the night?" She replied, "I am the daughter of Bethuel the son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor." And she went on, "There is plenty of straw and feed at home, and also room to spend the night." The man bowed low in homage to the Lord and said, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not withheld His steadfast faithfulness from my master. For I have been guided on my errand by the Lord, to the house of my master's kinsmen."

The maiden ran and told all this to her mother's household. Now Rebekah had a brother whose name was Laban. Laban ran out to the man at the spring—when he saw the nose-ring and the bands on his sister's arms, and when he heard his sister Rebekah say, "Thus the man spoke to me." He went up to the man, who was still standing beside the camels at the spring. "Come in, O blessed of the Lord," he said, "why do you remain outside, when I have made ready the house, and a place for the camels?" So the man entered the house, and the camels were unloaded. The camels were given straw and feed, and water was brought to bathe his feet and the feet of the men with him. But when the food was set before him, he said, "I will not eat until I have told my tale." He said, "Speak then."

"I am Abraham's servant," he began. "The Lord has greatly blessed my master, and he has become rich: He has given him sheep and cattle, silver and gold, male and female slaves, camels and asses. And Sarah, my master's wife, bore my master a son in her old age, and he has assigned to him everything he owns. Now my master made me swear, saying, 'You shall not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites in whose land I dwell; but you shall go to my father's house, to my kindred, and get a wife for my son.' And I said to my master, 'What if the woman does not follow me?' He replied to me, 'The Lord, whose ways I have followed, will send His angel with you and make your errand successful; and you will get a wife for my son from my kindred, from my father's house. Thus only shall you be freed from my adjuration: if, when you come to my kindred, they refuse you—only then shall you be freed from my adjuration.'

“I came to the spring, and I said: ‘O Lord, God of my master Abraham, if You would indeed grant success to the errand on which I am engaged! As I stand by the spring of water, let the young woman who comes out to draw and to whom I say, “Please, let me drink a little water from your jar,” and who answers, “You may drink, and I will also draw for your camels”—let her be the wife whom the Lord has decreed for my master’s son.’ I had scarcely finished praying in my heart, when Rebekah came out with her jar on her shoulder, and went down to the spring and drew. And I said to her, ‘Please give me a drink.’ She quickly lowered her jar and said, ‘Drink, and I will also water your camels.’ So I drank, and she also watered the camels. I inquired of her, ‘Whose daughter are you?’ And she said, ‘The daughter of Bethuel, son of Nahor, whom Milcah bore to him.’ And I put the ring on her nose and the bands on her arms. Then I bowed low in homage to the Lord and blessed the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who led me on the right way to get the daughter of my master’s brother for his son. And now, if you mean to treat my master with true kindness, tell me; and if not, tell me also, that I may turn right or left.”

Then Laban and Bethuel answered, “The matter was decreed by the Lord; we cannot speak to you bad or good. Here is Rebekah before you; take her and go, and let her be a wife to your master’s son, as the Lord has spoken.” When Abraham’s servant heard their words, he bowed low to the ground before the Lord. The servant brought out objects of silver and gold, and garments, and gave them to Rebekah; and he gave presents to her brother and her mother. Then he and the men with him ate and drank, and they spent the night. When they arose next morning, he said, “Give me leave to go to my master.” But her brother and her mother said, “Let the maiden remain with us some ten days; then you may go.” He said to them, “Do not delay me, now that the Lord has made my errand successful. Give me leave that I may go to my master.” And they said, “Let us call the girl and ask for her reply.” They called Rebekah and said to her, “Will you go with this man?” And she said, “I will.” So they sent off their sister Rebekah and her nurse along with Abraham’s servant and his men. And they blessed Rebekah and said to her,

“O sister!	Into thousands of myriads;
May you grow	May your offspring seize
	The gates of their foes.”

Then Rebekah and her maids arose, mounted the camels, and followed the man. So the servant took Rebekah and went his way.

Isaac had just come back from the vicinity of Beer-lahai-roi, for he was settled in the region of the Negeb. And Isaac went out walking in the field toward evening and, looking up, he saw camels approaching. Raising her eyes, Rebekah saw Isaac. She alighted from the camel and said to the servant, “Who is that man walking in the field toward us?” And the servant said, “That is my master.” So she took her veil and covered herself. The servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Isaac then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother’s death (Genesis 24:1–67).

. . . When Isaac was old and his eyes were too dim to see, he called his older son Esau and said to him, “My son.” He answered, “Here I am.” And he said, “I am old now, and I do not know how soon I may die. Take your gear, your quiver and bow, and go out into the open and hunt me some game. Then prepare a dish for me such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my innermost blessing before I die.”

Rebekah had been listening as Isaac spoke to his son Esau. When Esau had gone out into the open to hunt game to bring home, Rebekah said to her son Jacob, “I overheard your father speaking to your brother Esau, saying, ‘Bring me some game and prepare a dish for me to eat, that I may bless you, with the Lord’s approval, before I die.’ Now, my son, listen carefully as I instruct you. Go to the flock and fetch me two choice kids, and I will make of them a dish for your father, such as he likes. Then take it to your father to eat, in order that he may bless you before he dies.” Jacob answered his mother Rebekah, “But my brother Esau is a hairy man and I am smooth-skinned. If my father touches me, I shall appear to him as a trickster and bring upon myself a curse, not a blessing.” But his mother said to him, “Your curse, my son, be upon me! Just do as I say and go fetch them for me.”

He got them and brought them to his mother, and his mother prepared a dish such as his father liked. Rebekah then took the best clothes of her older son Esau, which were there in the house, and had her younger son Jacob put them on; and she covered his hands and the hairless part of his neck with the skins of the kids. Then she put in the hands of her son Jacob the dish and the bread that she had prepared.

He went to his father and said, “Father.” And he said, “Yes, which of my sons are you?” Jacob said to his father, “I am Esau, your first-born; I have done as you told me. Pray sit up and eat of my game, that you may give me your innermost blessing.” Isaac said to his son, “How did you succeed so quickly, my son?” And he said, “Because the Lord your God granted me good fortune.” Isaac said to Jacob, “Come closer that I may feel you, my son—whether you are really my son Esau or not.” So Jacob drew close to his father Isaac, who felt him and wondered. “The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau.” He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like those of his brother Esau; and so he blessed him (Genesis 27:1–23).

Questions on the Biblical Text:

1. There is a lot of “action” ascribed to Rebekah. Reflect on the active verbs you read.
2. What does the text say, and not say, about who Rebekah is?
3. How does Rebekah navigate the world of men? The world of women?
4. From the text, what do you glean about Rebekah’s relationship with God?

Classical Midrash

Rebekah's Birth and the Binding of Isaac

In this chapter [of the binding of Isaac], Rebekah was born, for we find that Isaac married Rebekah when she was 14 years old... -*Seder Olam Rabbah*

...and when [Abraham] was on Mt. Moriah [at the binding of Isaac], it was told that [Rebekah] the partner for his son was born.” - *Gen. Rabbah 57*

Rebekah's Suitability to be Isaac's Partner

All women went down and drew water from the well – whereas for Rebekah, the water went up as soon as it saw her. -*Gen. Rabbah 60*

With regard to Eliezer, servant of Abraham, he made a request when he prayed beside the well, as it is written: “That the maiden to whom I shall say: Please let down your pitcher that I may drink; and she shall say: Drink, and I will also give your camels to drink; that she be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac.” Eliezer entreated God unreasonably, as his request allowed for the possibility that she might even be lame or even blind, and yet he had promised to take her to Isaac. Nevertheless, God responded to him reasonably and the eminently suitable Rebekah happened to come to him. -*BT Taanit 4a*

All the days that Sarah was alive, a cloud was permanently connected to the entrance of her tent. When she died, the cloud stopped [resting at her tent.] And when Rebekah came, the cloud returned.

All the days that Sarah was alive, the doors were open wide. When she died, the wideness ceased. And when Rebekah came, the wideness returned.

And all the days that Sarah was alive, there was a blessing in her dough, and when Sarah died, that blessing ended. When Rebekah came, [the blessing] returned.

All the days that Sarah was alive, there was a candle that would burn from Sabbath Eve to [the next] Sabbath Eve, and when she died, the candle stopped [burning for so long]. And when Rebekah came, [the week-long flame of the candle] returned.

And as soon as [Isaac] saw her, that she did the deeds of his mother, separating her challah in purity and separating her dough in purity, he brought her into the tent.

-*Gen. Rabbah 60*

Rebekah's Barrenness and Holy Chutzpah

Why were the matriarchs unable to conceive? Because the Holy Blessed one yearns for their prayers and supplications. This is why it is written in Shir HaShirim 11: “Oh my dove, you are as the clefts of the rock! -*Gen. Rabbah 45*

Rabbi Yehudah said: Rebekah was barren for twenty years. After twenty years (Isaac) took Rebekah and went (with her) to Mount Moriah, to the place where he had been bound, and he prayed on her behalf that her womb would conceive; and the Holy One,

blessed be God, was entreated of him, as it is said, “**AND ISAAC PLEADED WITH GOD**” (25:21).

The children were contending with one another within her womb like mighty warriors, as it is said, “**THE CHILDREN STRUGGLED WITHIN HER**” (25:22) When she was in labor, her soul was close to death, owing to the pain, and she went to pray in the place whither she and Isaac had gone, as it is written, “**AND SHE WENT TO INQUIRE OF ADONAI.**” -*Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer 32*

AND IF SO, WHY DO I EXIST? R. Yitzchak taught, Our mother Rebekah went about the women’s gates and asked, “has this pain happens to you in your lives? If this is the pain is the pain (associated with birthing) sons/children, were it not that I was pregnant.

Rebekah Protects Jacob’s Destiny

THE CURSE BE ON ME, MY SON – Rebekah said to Jacob that the First Man (Adam) also sinned, and his mother, (Earth) was cursed, (Gen. 3) so too in this case, it shall be my curse, my son, not yours. -Genesis Rabbah 65

The plan was not from Rebekah, rather the Holy One had put it in her heart. She said to Jacob: When the first Adam sinned, was he cursed? Was it not his mother [Earth]? Thus it is stated in [Gen. 3] **CURSED IS THE LAND BECAUSE OF YOU**. Since LAND (אדמה) here is the feminine form of “Adam,” (אדם) the midrash interprets the cursed land as his mother. And now it is my turn, said Rebekah. Fulfill your destiny; and if you] ould be cursed, your curse will fall upon me.

[Why? Asked Jacob. The Holy One said to him: See, I have crowned you with blessings, as stated in Song of Songs 5:2 **FOR MY HEAD IS DRENCHED WITH DEW**. Jacob went immediately [to do his mother’s bidding.] When Jacob went in with his father to received the blessings, it is stated **SO MAY GOD GIVE TO YOU FROM THE DEW OF HEAVEN...**(Gen. 27:28) - *Midrash Tanchuma*

Modern Midrash

The most striking examples of women’s silence comes from texts in which women are most central, for there the normative character of maleness is especially jarring. In the family narratives of Genesis, for example, women figure prominently. The matriarchs of Genesis are all strong women. As independent personalities, fiercely concerned for their children, they often seem to have an intuitive knowledge of God’s plan for their sons. Indeed, from the stories of Sarah and Rebekah that they understand God better than their husbands. – Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*

Amidst her agony, that Rebekah spits out *anochi*, “I” – suggests that her question is of an existential nature. God hears her *anochi* as “But who am I? What is the meaning of my life in contradistinction to these beings growing inside of me?” ... Rebekah’s heartfelt

prayer [teaches] us that asking existential questions is part of the spiritual process of discovering meaning in our lives.

When Rebekah prays her prayer, “If so, why do I exist?” we can make a midrashic interpretation: “What do you want from me, God?” God answers her in such a way that she comes to understand her role in nurturing the future of the Jewish people. In contrast to her husband Isaac’s blindness, Rebekah is blessed with total clarity about her life’s purpose and its implications for future generations. Realizing herself as God’s partner, she makes decisions and carries out plans without hesitation.

-Rabbi Beth J. Singer, *The Women’s Torah Commentary*

With the *Taytsh-Khumesh*

Oh, what a nice matchmaker
Eliezer is!
Oh, what gold and silver
He throws at her feet!—

No, you’ve read enough girls,
In the *Taytsh-khumesh*:
Something chases me out
Into the night tonight.

Longing is so lucid,
The night is ever dim,—
Throw yourselves at happiness, sisters,
Burst into silvery laughter!

Suddenly the evening
Arranges shadows verse by verse . . .
Perhaps messengers are waiting
For us, too, in the field!

Far away the distance trembles,
Twitches and flashes, and calls,—
I see golden jewelry
Glistening in the air . . .

Throw yourselves at happiness, sisters,
Burst into silvery laughter:
Rebecca’s star will shine
Throughout the night.

Miriam Ulinover, Poland 1922

****Taytsh-Humesh** – Yiddish translation of
the Chumash

Songs of Women

For poor brides who were servant girls,
Mother Sara draws forth from dim barrels
And pitchers sparkling wine.
Mother Sara carries with both hands
A full pitcher to whom it is decreed.
And for streetwalkers
Dreaming of white wedding shoes,
Mother Sara bears clear honey
In small saucers
To their tired mouths.
For high-born brides now poor,
Who blush to bring patched wash
Before their mother-in-law,
Mother Rebecca leads camels
Laden with white linen.
And when darkness spreads before their feet,
And all the camels kneel on the ground to rest,
Mother Rebecca measures linen ell by ell
From her fingers to her golden bracelet.
For those whose eyes are tired
From watching the neighborhood children,
And whose hands are thin from yearning
For a soft small body
And for the rocking of a cradle,
Mother Rachel brings healing leaves
Discovered on distant mountains,
And comforts them with a quiet word:
At any hour God may open the sealed womb.
For those who cry at night in lonely beds,
And have no one to share their sorrow,
Who talk to themselves with parched lips,
To them, Mother Leah comes quietly,
Her eyes covered with her pale hands.

- *Kadya Molodowsky, Poland 1927*

Both poems above were translated into English by Kathryn Hellerstein